CHAPTER III

HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE

FIRE-MAKING

372 The Copper Eskimo were familiar with the method of making fire by means of the thong drill, but rarely practised it because it involved strenuous labour and suitable wood was rare. [412] The handles of some of their whittling knives and other tools had small holes to fit the top of the spindle, for a man pressing down with both hands could exert greater force than was obtainable with the usual drill mouthpiece. Figure 46 shows the hearth of an old fire-making apparatus; the specimen was discovered on the beach at Kater Point, close to Bathurst Inlet.

372 316 The ordinary method of making fire was by striking together two pieces of iron pyrites, for which there were several sources around Coronation Gulf, the two best known being Kugaluk River, which flows down from the Colville Hills in southwest Victoria Island into the sea behind Cape Kendall, and a small river a few miles east of Coppermine River. The pyrites was occasionally covered with sealskin or caribou skin to protect the hand.

372 237 415 [824] The spark was caught in willow catkins contained in a small disk-shaped bag of sealskin closed with a circular lid of the same material (Figure 47). A little blowing soon spread the glow over a large surface so that it could ignite a lamp-stick or a bunch of matted moss roots dipped in blubber. To foment a flame, however, most Eskimo kept a little stock of dry grass, which, like the lamp-wick of eriophorum seed, they carried in small bags made from the lining around the heart of some animal (Figure 48), from the skin on a loon's foot (Figure 49), or from caribou or marmot fur.

LAMPS

354 "Many writers have stressed the fundamental importance of the Eskimo blubber lamp, without which the natives could not have survived along the northern coast-line. [1078] Although in certain regions they have now adopted substitutes such as stearin candles, coal-oil lamps, wood stoves, and primus stoves, throughout large parts of the Arctic the blubber lamp still holds its own.

Porsild[1] states that "In Arctic regions proper, train-oil is the only fuel, and there the lamps are large; where other fuel [392] —heather, wood, peat or coal—is available, either the whole year round or only in the summer, the lamp used for burning blubber oil loses its importance as a heater, and is used

Figure 46. Wooden hearth of fire drill. IV.D.219. 2/3.

[113] [1] Porsild, Morten P.: The Material Culture of the Eskimo in West Greenland; Meddelelser om Grønland, vol. LI, p. 214.

interesting, because it has been broken across in two places and repaired with six copper bands. Moreover, unlike all the other pots from this region in the possession of the museum, it is made from a biotite chlorite schist. Yet in shape it is almost a duplicate of No. IV.D.676 (Figure 59), the sides in both pots being unusually convex. The latter vessel came from Coppermine River, and is of the usual soapstone (talc chlorite schist) from the quarry near Tree River.

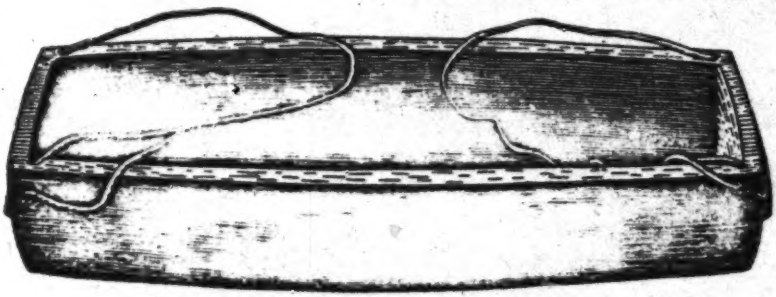

Figure 59. Typical soapstone pot. IV.D.678. Approx. 1/2.

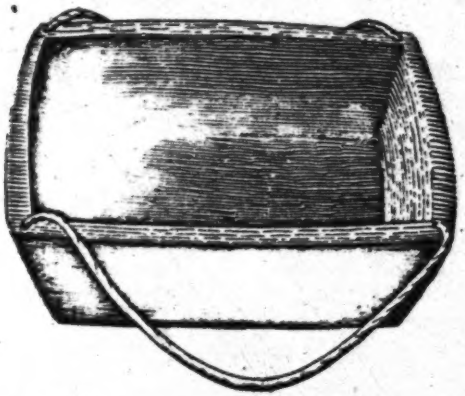

Figure 60. Squarish soapstone pot, now in Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

From an artistic point of view it would seem that the pots of the Copper Eskimo have degenerated during the last 150 years, for Hearne gives a slightly different description of the vessels he saw in the Eskimo encampment at Bloody Fall, near the mouth of Coppermine River. "Some of those kettles are so large as to be capable of containing five or six gallons; and though it is impossible these poor people can perform this arduous work with any other tools than harder stones, yet they are by far superior to any that I had ever seen in Hudson's Bay; every one of them being ornamented with neat mouldings round the rim, and some of the large ones with a kind of flute-work at each corner. In shape they were a long square, something wider at the top than bottom, like a knife-tray, and strong handles of the solid stone were left at each end to lift them up."[1]

[1] Hearne's Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean, edited by J. B. Tyrrell; The Champlain Society, Toronto, 1911, p. 102.

The flute-work in the corners and the strong handles of solid stone both disappeared, though the latter survived among the Caribou Eskimo.[1] In order perhaps to replace the handles, the neat ridges were lowered down the face of the short ends, and they were dropped entirely from the longer sides. With regard to the flute-work in each corner one may perhaps conjecture that it was a rounded projection pierced with a suspension hole, as in the pots of West Greenland,[2] to avoid drilling through the actual wall. So far as I know no specimen exists of the type of pot seen by Hearne.

TABLE

The table, having no legs, was practicable only in a snow-hut where one end could be supported by the snow wall.[3] As soon as the snow melted, therefore, it was cached with the lamp at some convenient spot on land and abandoned until the early winter. In shape, it was roughly rectangular, with one end often a little wider than the other; and in size, it ranged from 3½ to 4½ feet long by 10 to 15 inches wide. An average specimen is shown in Figure 61.

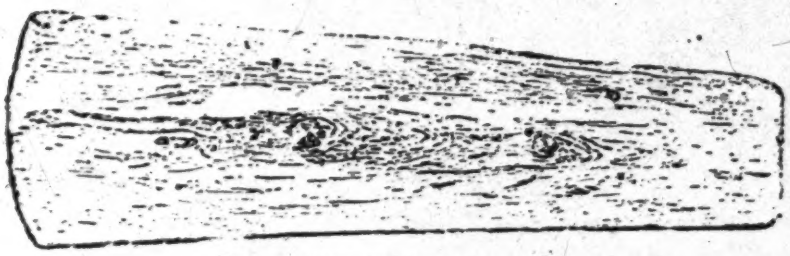

Figure 61. Table. IV.D.698. Approx. 1/12.

DRYING FRAME

The Copper Eskimo generally bestowed very little care on the making and handling of their drying frames, which, in consequence, were frequently broken and bent out of shape. Properly made specimens were never round, but roughly oval, the curve being flattened on the long side that fronted the sleeping platform. Occasionally the two ends of the wooden hoop were merely lashed together; more often they were pegged with bone or copper pins. The frame was further strengthened by cross bars of sticks that passed at intervals of a few inches from one long side to the other and were lashed to the under edge of the frame exactly as the cross bars of a sled were lashed to the runners. Newly made specimens, especially if large, had webbings of rawhide, but when the rawhide dried out and broke the owners often mended it with sinew. The thongs passed through holes (often sunken) in the frame, forming a warp and a weft that interlaced in what is known as cross-weft pattern, and gave square meshes from 2 to 4 inches across. A typical drying frame is shown in Figure 62. Simpson reported frames made of baleen on the south coast of Victoria Island near Wellington Bay,[4] but all that I observed were made of wood.

[1] Birket-Smith, K.: The Caribou Eskimos, pt. I, p. 163; Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-24, vol. V, Copenhagen, 1929.

[2] Thomsen, T.: Implements and Artifacts of the North-East Greenlanders; Meddelelser om Grønland, vol. XLIV, p. 468.

[3] For the method of supporting the table, lamp, cooking pot, and drying frame *See* Reports of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, vol. XII, pt. A, p. 61.

[4] Simpson, Thomas: Narrative of the Discoveries on the North Coast of America, London, 1843, p. 204.

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meat; the smaller ones, which had a special name *qimalik*, for cutting and trimming skins. In shape, they were practically identical, except that the smaller tool often had a more rounded edge than the tool used for cutting meat.

Women's knives, like men's, often had sharpeners attached to them by a cord of sinew. The earlier sharpener was the tooth of some animal, often the molar tooth of a musk-ox or bear; or a whetstone made from sandstone or other gritty rock; or a stick of copper mounted in a bone or antler handle (Figure 86). By 1914, nearly every native was using a fragment from a file, or the firing pin of an old rifle. Men generally used their sharpeners as a butcher uses his steel, but the women held the steel in the left hand and ran the edge of the blade to and fro along its surface.

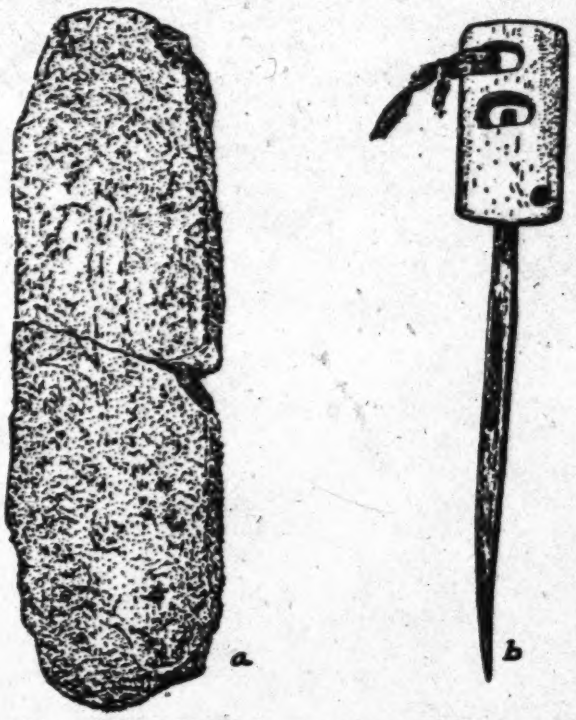

Figure 86. a: whetstone, IV.D.77; b: copper knife sharpener, IV.D.1261. 1/1.

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Skin Scrapers. The scraper used to remove the fat and inner tissue of skins had a small copper blade with a curved edge mounted on a long handle of antler. Today, in this as in other implements, iron has taken the place of copper. The handle was nearly always forked, the branch-prong preventing the hand from sliding forward. Most specimens had also a notch for the forefinger cut in the under side. Figure 87c shows a typical specimen; its iron blade is fastened by two copper rivets to the handle, which has been flattened on its lower face. Its prototype with a copper blade is shown in Figure 88.

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By 1914 hardly a single copper-bladed knife remained in the country, except specimens that had been manufactured for sale to the first traders, like those shown in Figure 109. All the Copper Eskimo were using iron knives of various sizes and shapes, some with small blades and long handles, others with long blades and short handles, some single-edged and some two-edged (Figure 110). Specialization in types was beginning. For cutting snow, knives with long handles and long blades were accounted the most useful; for skinning caribou and seals, knives with shorter handles and blades of medium length. Some natives still preferred two-edged knives for skinning, others liked a sharp point, curved back, and a blunt back edge, as in the European hunting knife. Many men made still smaller knives for miscellaneous uses around the camp. A [439] certain number of small knives with copper blades may have been used even in the earliest days,[1] but all such specimens that I have seen, whether of iron or copper, date from the twentieth century, and the copper ones were made to sell to Europeans. Certainly the commonest type of knife in pre-European days, perhaps the only type outside the whittling knife, was the large lanceolate form commonly called the snow knife.

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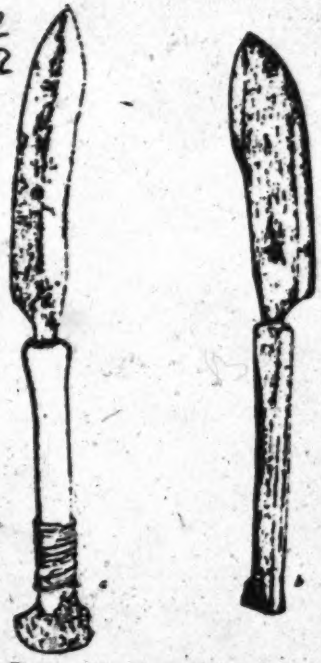

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Figure 109. Copper-bladed knives made for sale. *a*, IV.D.1361, 1/2; *b*, IV.D.343, approx. 1/2.

The older Thule inhabitants of the region, like those to the west and east, used a large, curved snow knife, nearly always made from whalebone. Figure 112 (IV.D.1660), however, shows a specimen obtained by Capt. J. Bernard in Coronation Gulf that is made from musk-ox horn. The local Eskimo knew its purpose, but had no recollection of ever using such a tool themselves.

Whittling Knives. Typical whittling knives (*haviro.n*) with iron blades are shown in Figure 113. Copper was used for the blade in early times, but I was able to obtain only two examples, one of which is shown in Figure 114. Here, as often with the iron-bladed whittling knives, the handle is perforated half-way along its length for the attachment of the sharpener, which was usually of steel, but in this case a small copper pencil mounted in an antler handle.

Figure 113*a* shows a fairly old specimen with a tiny blade of what seems to be hoop iron; the handle, as usual, is of antler, and the rivet in this case of copper. In the specimen represented in Figure 113*b* the handle has been extended by splicing a short additional piece of antler. The same thing has occurred in the specimen shown in Figure 113*d*, but such extensions were less usual among the Copper Eskimo than among the Eskimo to the west.

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[1] In 1929 Mr. Lincoln Washburn obtained a handleless copper knife blade (Figure 111) that had been picked up on Victoria Island. One surface only was covered with a green patina; the other was still coppery, though dulled. Probably the specimen is not of great age.